

Smith, George A.

386-02-05 U S Navy

December 7, 1941

Youngest Sailor on board the U S S Oklahoma.

George was awakened at 3:00 AM on the morning of December 7th to report to his regular watch on the port machine gun. He had the 4:00 to 8:00 AM watch. George was relieved from watch at 7:45 AM and reported to the galley for chow, only to be told that the cook had forgotten to save any food for him. The cook volunteered to fix something, but George declined, saying that he was going ashore and would eat in town.

George went to his locker and removed his clothing preparing to dress for liberty. While he was clad only in shorts, he heard a loud voice over the loudspeaker saying, "All hands, man your battle stations." The first thought to cross George's mind was that they were told there would be battle drills all day Sunday, and this made for one very mad sailor--to be deprived of liberty for practice drills.

A loud explosion from the first torpedo hitting the U.S.S. OKLAHOMA was followed instantly by a voice on the loudspeaker bellowing, "This is no SHIT! Man your battle stations!" George went immediately to his battle station on #4 broadside. Here he was joined by three seaman recruits, none of whom knew how to operate the gun or what to do. Glancing out through the gun port, George could see the enemy planes coming in for the attack. Momentarily all he could do was to stare at this incredible sight that was taking place. Another torpedo hit just below him, and he tried to get out of the compartment. However, the hatches had been dogged, and the ship was beginning to list badly. The terror that filled his heart and mind at that moment was almost unbearable. However, he and his buddy dove out through the gun port into the water. Glancing around, George could see the ship rolling over on him. Swimming through the burning oil-covered water, he rounded the bow of the ship just as the U.S.S. OKLAHOMA rolled completely over. He swam to the U.S.S. MARYLAND tied up alongside, only to be told he could not come aboard.

Clad only in shorts and covered with oil, he managed to reach Ford Island and drag himself up on a grassy bank where he lay exhausted and petrified. A Jeep came by and a voice yelled out that he was lying on a gas storage tank.

George and his friend dove back into the water and swam to the U.S.S. MARYLAND. They remained there until the attack ended. They were without clothes, covered with grease and scared.

While George was in the water, the explosion that made a memory of the U.S.S. ARIZONA was felt by him and his friend.

George returned to Ford Island after the attack and was assigned to a motor launch. Their job was to go across the channel to where the U.S.S. NEVADA was tied up and board trucks to haul ammunition from an Army depot about fifteen miles away. This task lasted on into the night and with the blackout imposed, no lights on the truck could be used. George sat on one front fender and another man on the other to direct the driver through the darkness. Somewhere on Ford Island that night George found a pair of white navy shorts and a CPO raincoat. This made up the uniform he wore for some time. During the night, the last load of ammunition was brought in, so George reported to the receiving station in the Navy Yard and was assigned to a bed. Sleep was not to be, however. About 3:00 AM a man came in and asked for a hundred volunteers for a work party. George went with the group to the U.S.S. CALIFORNIA to remove the bodies of the men who did not survive the attack. Working at this gruesome detail until 10:00 AM that morning, George finally went to bed, exhausted, hungry and sick from the task he had been doing. He slept for the next thirty hours.

An improbable escape

■ PEARL HARBOR:

A Tenino resident recounts the day he survived the sinking of the USS Oklahoma.

By Larry Miller

The Olympian

THURSTON COUNTY — Quick thinking and swift swimming kept George Smith alive 58 years ago today when 429 of his shipmates on the USS Oklahoma perished.

Smith had enlisted about five months earlier, on his 17th birthday. According to the Pearl Harbor Survivors Association, he was the Oklahoma's youngest crew member when the Japanese navy attacked the U.S. Pacific Fleet Dec. 7, 1941.

He grew up fast.

Hit by at least seven and probably nine torpedoes, the Oklahoma capsized and sank in 10 minutes.

Smith was below deck, dressing for a planned day on leave at Waikiki Beach, when the first torpedo hit at about 8 a.m. He ran in his underwear to his battle station, an enclosed machine gun post.

After the fifth torpedo struck below him and someone shouted "abandon ship" over the loudspeakers, Smith and the others in the gun station found its hatches wouldn't open.

Terrified, Smith and two other young sailors jumped through the gun port into Pearl Harbor.

As the battleship rolled toward them, they narrowly escaped being crushed between its deck and the bottom of the shallow harbor.

"Right on top of us it was rolling," he said. "I thought, 'I'll never make it out of here.'"

But swimming faster than they knew they could, the three sailors cleared the path of the capsizing ship by a few feet before it came crashing down.

Two days later, Smith got a new assignment aboard the USS Preble, a mine-laying destroyer. He served in the Pacific fleet through the war and was in the Battle of Midway in 1942.

A retired University of



Larry Miller/The Olympian

LIFE JOURNEY: George Smith displays a photo taken a few months before he barely escaped the capsizing battleship USS Oklahoma during the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Washington employee, Smith lives near Tenino and heads a South Sound chapter of the Pearl Harbor Survivors Association.

He and other veterans of Pearl Harbor speak "as often as we can" to school classes and civic groups about that Sunday morning 58 years ago.

"They don't want the kids to forget," said Elizabeth Smith, his wife of 52 years.

Ask George Smith what he learned that day, and he'll teach you the Pearl Harbor Survivors Association motto: "Be prepared."

Larry Miller writes for The Olympian. He can be reached at 754-5465.

DEC. 7, 1941

For the United States, World War II began the morning of Dec. 7, 1941, when Japan attacked the U.S. Pacific Fleet in Pearl Harbor. The attack killed 2,335 U.S. service members and 68 civilians.